

# *My Shepherd*

*On the occasion of the blessing of the fleece*

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*(Based on thoughts of Susan Snook)*

## Sunday, October 23, 2022

The Twenty-Third Psalm is one of the most well-known chapters in the Bible. Countless people have memorized it,

Many of us recall Sunday-school posters of this favourite psalm superimposed on beautiful painted pictures of Jesus on a grassy hillside, with a lamb over his shoulders, rescuing it from danger. Many children still get great comfort from the image of the kind and gentle Jesus who cares for all God's creatures. This is the Jesus who will stay with a child through a dark night filled with terrors: alligators under the bed and monsters in the closet. This is the Jesus who stays with adults too, through nights of weeping, and loneliness, and worry, and despair.

And in those times of danger and grief, many people turn to the Twenty-Third Psalm for comfort. At the bedside of people facing surgery or serious illness, reciting the psalm brings peace and hopefulness. At memorial services, it evokes the kind and loving presence of the God who promises an eternal dwelling place in the house of the Lord.

But then, there are the times when events in our lives or in our world throw our peace, our hopefulness, our comfort into doubt - times when the Jesus we remember from our childhood, smiling on that grassy hillside, seems almost irrelevant to the darkness of the world.

We experience these times constantly. As we watch the news whether it is the endless school shootings in America or the devastation of the Ukraine. How do we make sense of a world in which a young person can be so troubled, so destructive, and so unable to receive the help that others offered him? How do we make sense of a world in which such bright, innocent, promising young lives are tragically and suddenly lost? How do we begin to understand a world where people in America, Ukraine, Myanmar, and a thousand other places die regularly and senselessly?

Perhaps the people crowding around Jesus in the Portico of Solomon were asking similar questions. At the Feast of the Dedication, the feast we now know as Hanukkah, the people remembered how the nation rededicated the temple after a great leader, Judas Maccabeus, defeated the Greek conquerors in 164 BC. The festival remembered the suffering of the Jewish people under the Greek Empire and rejoiced at their great victory. Against this background, with Roman soldiers hovering and memories of thousands of crucified would-be rebels and other unjust suffering fresh in their minds, people asked Jesus, "Are you the Messiah?" Would Jesus be the new hero who would drive out the Roman invader? Would the nation be free and independent once more?

The people crowding around Jesus want a clear and decisive answer. Instead, he is cryptic and evasive. The people want him to speak with authority about weapons and strategies; instead, he talks about sheep. To their demand that he assume the leadership for which

they have been hoping, he answers with a claim of leadership so astounding that many of them pick up stones to kill him on the spot: he claims to be one with God the Father.

This is no gentle, clear-eyed Jesus on a green, rolling hillside; this is a fierce, uncompromising Jesus, a Jesus who refuses to meet any earthly expectations, a Jesus whose frame of reference is so far removed from that of the people around him that it is a wonder he escapes with his life. And indeed, John tells us that the next time Jesus dares to show his face in Jerusalem, the chief priests cook up a scheme to have him crucified.

How do we reconcile the gentle, kind shepherd Jesus, the one who would go anywhere and risk anything to save even the smallest lamb, with the Jesus who provoked his enemies to violence? And how does this Jesus have anything at all to do with the worries and dangers of our lives? How can our faith in Jesus help us through the tragedies of life? What can the gentle shepherd do to help?

The wonderful thing about Psalm 23 is just how realistic it is about the darkness of life. Perhaps the picture we get of the Good Shepherd from art and music and childhood memories is an image of pure light and pure sweetness. But the psalm itself knows darkness and fear. Like the writer of the psalm, many Christians have travelled through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. They too have known the threat of the unknown. And yet many have also known the comfort of God's presence, walking alongside them through that dark valley. Many people have felt the exquisite sweetness of Jesus' love surrounding and enfolding them in the most difficult moments of their lives. Many have experienced transcendent holiness and light in the darkest of times.

People who spend much time with those who are ill or bereaved begin to know what kind of help brings true comfort. Comfort does not come from assurances that everything will be all right or from platitudes that try to explain why everything that happens is God's will. Comfort comes from the simple presence of companions who are willing to sit alongside us in our darkest hours, to walk through the darkness with us, to help us make the darkness holy, and to rejoice with us when small glimmers of light finally begin to shine.

And at the heart of it, that is what our Christian faith can tell us. It tells us that our Lord and Saviour, the great hero who liberates us, is not the God of light alone. Jesus is sovereign over the darkness too because he too has been enfolded by darkness. Like us, he has grieved over the senseless waste and tragedy of life. Like us, he has agonized over those who suffer. As all of us will eventually, he has entered into the darkness of death. And with all of us, he promises to walk that road so that we do not have to walk it alone. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me."

The ultimate truth of our Christian faith, the truth we remember every Sunday as we celebrate the Lord's Resurrection, is that our Shepherd leads us out of death into life. The Lord who was crucified and who rose again is the same Lord who promises to redeem the world, to relieve its suffering, to restore it to wholeness, to inaugurate a new creation. The risen Lord is the sign of the life that God promises to all of us: life transformed, life redeemed, life restored, life abundant, life joyous and eternal and blessed. God prepares a table for all of us: a table brimful with overflowing cups and overabundant blessings. And Jesus, our Great Shepherd, invites us to come and share with him at the table of blessing.

**AMEN.**